

mammals in the different habitats of Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, was studied in 1997. Small mammals were trapped in Sherman traps placed on the ground in the chosen study grids, baited with coconut. The Malabar spiny dormouse was recorded at an elevation of 1,000 m in the semi-evergreen forest of Benne, in May. One individual was captured, preserved and later identified. Its morphometric measurements were: head-body

length 12.6 cm; tail length 13.5cm; hind foot length 2.5 cm; weight 82g (live individual).

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5. THE WILD ELEPHANT *ELEPHAS MAXIMUS* IN MIZORAM

(With a text-figure)

The Asian elephant *Elephas maximus* Linn. is distributed in northeastern India in 14 discrete populations (Choudhury 1999). The populations in Mizoram and Tripura were treated as a single one, with probable movement through Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. A field trip was made in April 2000 (for 14 days) to assess the status of elephants in Mizoram. During this trip, all the known sites were visited and the Forest Department officials, local hunters/poachers and other tribal villagers were interviewed. The state of Mizoram (21° 58'-24° 30' N, 92° 16'-93° 25' E) (area 21,081 sq. km) (Fig. 1) was referred to in the past as the Lushai Hills of southern Assam. The entire area is hilly, being part of the Himalaya-Arakan mountain chain. The terrain is dissected mostly by north-south flowing rivers, which make a series of parallel ranges. The highest ranges are towards east with Phawngpui or Blue Mountain (2,157 m above msl) and Lengtung (2,141 m above msl) peaks. The lowest evaluation is in the riverbeds

near Assam-Mizoram and India-Bangladesh border (less than 100 m above msl).

Till the 1950s, the elephant was widespread all over the state, especially in the north, west and south (source: local reports by villagers, and A. Laskar, S. Laskar, *pers. comm.*). However, it was never common in recent memory, as its meat was relished by all the tribes (Mizo, Lai or Pawi, Mara or Lakher, Bru or Reang, Chakma, and Hmar) and it was regularly hunted. In the 1960s, when insurgency started, modern firearms became easily available, resulting in a phenomenal increase in poaching. At the same time, ivory also became an important target (especially for sale in southeast Asia markets to buy arms). With the gradual increase in human population, the destruction of forest through felling and *jhum* (shifting cultivation) has also increased. By the 1970s, the main elephant strongholds remained only in the western and southern areas, with small populations elsewhere. By 1980s, the northern elephant population was reduced to stray

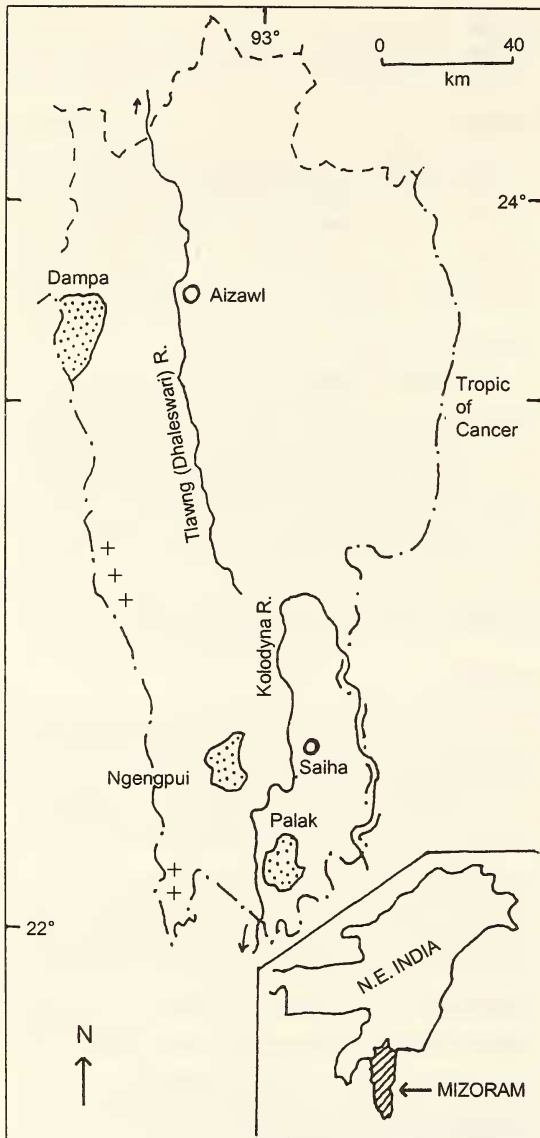



Fig. 1: Map of Mizoram showing the current distribution of elephants  and occasional migrants from Bangladesh (+)

individuals with no future, while the western and southern populations were confined to a few pockets (A. Laskar, *pers. comm.*). In the 1990s, the elephant survived only in three areas, with a few stray animals in other areas. In the mean time, the human population of Mizoram grew from

3,32,000 (0.33 million) in 1971 to 6,86,000 (0.69 million) in 1991, i.e. more than double in two decades, indicating a phenomenal corresponding increase in *jhum* cultivation.

The main elephant population is now confined to Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary (110 sq. km), Lawngtlai district in the far south, and Dampa Sanctuary and Tiger Reserve (500 sq. km), Mamit district in the west. In 1996, a census party of the Forest Department located only four elephants in part of Dampa. Unfortunately, a *makhna* from this population died in 1998 due to accidental strangulation near Lallen. While sliding down a slope, its head got sandwiched between two tree trunks from which it could not recover itself (Jain and Saandeep 2001). These animals occasionally cross over to Bangladesh also. Local reports indicate that more than 10 elephants were present in the early 1980s. At that time, there was a lone bull at Bolung (S. Laskar, *pers. comm.*) northeast of Dampa.

Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary and adjacent southern areas have the largest population of elephants in Mizoram now: however, only of eight animals. Old villagers of Ngengpui and Khawmawi report that there were more than 20 animals in the early 1980s. These elephants move out of the Sanctuary to the Ngengpui Reserved Forest (Lunglei district) as well as unclassified forests near Mampui.

The third group in the state is in Saiha district, around Palak Dil (Dil = lake). Only three are surviving from what was a fairly large population of at least 50 in the 1970s. According to the elders of Phura village, most of them were shot dead for meat and tusks by extremists. The surviving three cause much damage to standing paddy at Phura valley, but the villagers (Mara or Lakher tribe) do not retaliate, in consideration of the very low population and a vanishing heritage.

Stray elephants, often in small herds, have been reported from the forests northwest of Tlabung (Demagiri) in Lunglei district and Parva

in Lawngtlai district. These are occasional immigrants from Bangladesh, especially during the paddy season.

These are no reports of occurrence of elephants in recent years from Aizawl, Serchhip, Kolasib and Champhai district.

From the above account, it seems that the total number of elephants in Mizoram is only 14, with some seasonal migrants from Bangladesh. Their chances of long-term survival in the wild in Mizoram are bleak, as the existing herds are not only very small, but also severely fragmented, with no possibility of contiguity.

Habitat destruction and poaching continue to be major threats. The decrease of population in Ngengpui (from 10 in 1993 to 8 in 1997) indicates unreported poaching. Protection measures in Dampa and Ngengpui should be strengthened. Part of Dampa is now virtually out of bounds due to insurgency by the Bru (Reang) militants. Palak Dil and adjacent forests (about 40 sq. km) should be declared as a wildlife sanctuary (it is also the largest lake in Mizoram). To avoid inbreeding and maintain genetic quality, translocation of one or two elephants from Assam

(where troublesome elephants are occasionally captured) or Meghalaya to Dampa and Ngengpui could have solved the problem, but the prevailing situation makes it unlikely in the near future. With better protection, Dampa and Ngengpui could support larger populations. Conservation education among the local villagers, with the help of NGOs, is also strongly recommended.

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6. ON LITTLE GREBES *TACHYBAPTUS RUFICOLLIS* BREEDING NEAR K. KARUNANIDHI NAGAR, TIRUCHIRAPALLI, TAMIL NADU

Little grebes *Podiceps* (= *Tachybaptus*) *ruficollis* were common around Trichinopoly in the 1930s. One Mr. C. McConway had collected over one hundred eggs, and washed them (with Vim and Monkey brand soap) to find out whether the brown coloration on the eggs was original or acquired. He reported that the coloration was no indication of incubation stage (Baker & Inglis 1930. THE BIRDS OF SOUTHERN INDIA, p. 485). Sixty to seventy years later, they are still common,

despite the developmental changes in their habitat. At the onset of the southwest monsoon, when the ruddy brown earth is carried into ponds by rainwater and settles at the bottom, the pond water becomes clear. Little grebes arrive noiselessly during cloudy afternoons in hundreds, and run on this clear water surface, beating their wings. They stay on, breed and leave in mid-January. The three main water bodies frequented by the little grebes are Vadugapatty Periakulam,